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Indonesia: Update to IDN43363.E of 2 February 2005, IDN43347.E of 27 January 2005, IDN43329 of 20 January 2005, IDN43304.E of 13 January 2005, and IDN43291 of 7 January 2005 on the impact of the 26 December 2004 earthquake and tsunami on the human rights situation, particularly in Aceh province (3-9 February 2005)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

The Security Situation in Aceh

In a 2 February 2005 article, the Associated Press (AP) indicated that, following negotiations in Finland on the weekend of 29 January 2005, dialogue between the Indonesian government and rebels from the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) is likely to resume in February 2005. Indonesian vice president Yusuf Kalla echoed this optimism, indicating his hope that talks would resume "by the end of this month [February 2005]" (AFP 3 Feb. 2005c).

However, AP reported a flare-up in clashes between Indonesian troops and GAM in northern Aceh on 6 February 2005, during which soldiers killed seven suspected rebels by bringing to 200 the number of rebels that the Indonesian army claims to have killed since an informal cease-fire began on 26 December 2004 (7 Feb. 2005). Corroborating information could not be found within time constraints.

A spokesperson from the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is reported to have stated that Indonesia would not blame the US military relief mission in Aceh for handing relief supply to Aceh rebels, since the aid is considered to have been provided "in the context of humanitarian assistance" (Xinhua 4 Feb. 2005).

On 3 February 2005, five witnesses told AP that Indonesian soldiers had allegedly beaten tsunami survivors and volunteers in a camp near Banda Aceh (3 Feb. 2005b). The troops purportedly forced 150 survivors and volunteers to line up and look at a "suspected rebel guerrilla" who, according to the soldiers, was on a wanted list (AP 3 Feb. 2005b). Several of these men were reportedly punched, and one man claimed that a soldier had threatened to kill all the people who had lined up (ibid.). The Indonesian military told AP that it was unaware of this incident (ibid.), and corroborating evidence of this report could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within time constraints.

AFP reported that according to Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Human Rights First, Indonesia should consider reducing its military presence in Aceh because of concerns for potential human rights violations (AFP 8 Feb. 2005). These human rights groups further indicated that plans to move some 100,000 tsunami survivors to new camps could be used for "controlling the population for military purposes unless human rights safeguards [were] put in place" (ibid.) and that the camps could become "isolated ghettos" (AP 8 Feb. 2005). Furthermore, a Human Rights First representative voiced concerns that the government registration of tsunami survivors might "be used to target alleged separatist supporters and deny them humanitarian aid" (AFP 8 Feb. 2005b).

The Distribution of Aid in Aceh

A United Nations (UN) coordinator said that his organization "[did] not expect to be a target" of an offensive in Aceh, although AP cited security concerns as the reason behind the decision to move 100 aid workers to a new compound, as security in the current compound was "not optimal" (8 Feb. 2005b).

Several sources reported on the gradual winding down of aid missions to Indonesia (AFP 3 Feb. 2005a; AP 4 Feb. 2005; ibid. 8 Feb. 2005a; IHT 4 Feb. 2005). Approximately 1,000 Australian troops are due to leave Indonesia soon, perhaps in a matter of weeks (AFP 3 Feb. 2005a; AP 4 Feb. 2005). A large American carrier that was crucial for many major relief operations was also scheduled to leave Aceh by 5 February 2005 (AFP 3 Feb. 2005b; IHT 4 Feb. 2005; AP 3 Feb. 2005a) and approximately 5,000 US troops will leave the country in the coming weeks (AP 4 Feb. 2005). Sources indicated that the deployment of foreign troops to Aceh has been a sensitive diplomatic issue in Indonesia (AFP 3 Feb. 2005b; ibid. 4 Feb. 2005; AP 4 Feb. 2005). Japan was also scheduled to pull out its 960 troops who had been assisting with medical and humanitarian relief, by the end of March (AP 8 Feb. 2005a).

However, AP indicated that the new 1,000-bed US hospital ship that was due to arrive in Aceh on 10 February 2005 was expected to provide much-needed medical relief for the region (AFP 3 Feb. 2005d). In addition, IPR

Middle East News reported that 10 nations had joined in efforts to build field hospitals in several areas of Aceh (6 Feb. 2005).

An official of the US Treasury Department expressed concern about aid from a major Saudi charitable organization "under scrutiny for alleged terrorist financing" (*Miami Herald* 7 Feb. 2005). The same newspaper article claimed there were concerns that the group would "spread extremist Islam" because of the groups alleged ties to Wahhabist ideologues (ibid.). There are conflicting reports as to the International Islamic Relief Organization's ties with terrorist groups (ibid.), claims that the group spokesperson denied (ibid.).

Reuters reported that the number of children in Aceh orphaned by the tsunami of 26 December 2005; more than 175, was lower than had been feared (8 Feb. 2005). Estimates by the World Bank and Indonesian authorities in January had said approximately 8,000 children had lost both parents in the disaster (Reuters 8 Feb. 2005).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection.

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